



South Asians in Colonial America

From the very beginning, they sought freedom.

By FRANCIS C. ASSISI

The first South Asians may have been brought to Virginia within a generation of the arrival of European settlers—as early as 1624.

As America celebrates its 400th anniversary this year, among the population are descendants of South Asians whose history extends back 375 years to colonial Virginia: people referred to in court documents of the time as “East Indians” or “Asiatic Indians.” They came to be identified variously as “Mullato” “Negro” and “colored” in the ethnic cauldron that was evolving in America, losing much of their racial distinctiveness with each passing generation, merging into the African American community, and largely unaware of their links to the Indian subcontinent.

But two decades of meticulous research by members of this population group, historians and sociologists has produced exciting evidence of not only their presence in early America, but their driving desire to emulate in their own lives what would become the ethos of this “new” land—a striving for personal freedom. Research suggests that South Asians were transported as indentured servants or as slaves by Dutch, French, English and, later, American trading vessels. Yet the records of county courts along the eastern coast show that many of these transported “East Indians” were soon suing their “masters” to regain their freedom or simply running away.

There is considerable evidence that seamen were recruited from Indian ports by European trading ships, and, on reaching Europe, succumbed to the promises of agents who enlisted indentured workers for the New World. Or they were taken as servants by East India Company officials who returned home to England and thence to the newly established colonies in America. We will never know their true names or their original

homes in South Asia. It’s likely they hailed from ports in Bengal, Madras, Pondicherry, Malabar, Mumbai and Goa as well as Mauritius, Madagascar and South Africa, where the ships routinely sailed.

Much of the evidence of South Asians in early America is found in old newspaper advertisements seeking help to retrieve runaway slaves.

On July 13, 1776, the *Virginia Gazette* reported the escape of a “Servant Man named John Newton, about 20 Years of Age, 5 feet 5 or 6 Inches high, slender made, is an Asiatic Indian by Birth, has been about twelve Months in Virginia, but lived ten Years (as he says) in England, in the Service of Sir Charles Whitworth. He wears long black Hair, which inclines to curl, tied behind, and pinned up at the Sides...He left his Master on the Road from Williamsburg, between King William Courthouse and Todd’s Bridge, where he was left behind to come on slowly with a tired Horse...” The advertisement goes on: “He is a good Barber and Hair-Dresser, it is probable he may endeavour to follow those Occupations as a free Man. Whoever takes up the said Servant, and secures him in Gaol, giving me information thereof, so that I may get him again, shall have eight dollars Reward; and if delivered to me...further reasonable Charges, paid by William Brown.”

It appears that Newton made good his escape. Brown placed another ad six days later, raising the reward to \$10.

More such snippets are compiled by Thomas Costa, a history professor at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise, for the Virginia Center for Digital History and Electronic Text Center. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/subjects/runaways/allrecords.html>

At the heart of the early migration to colonial America was the headright system designed to encourage immigration. Every

Englishman who “imported” a laborer or servant to the colony received a 20-hectare land grant. Each “head” gave the importer a “right” to land; thus, headright.

A 2006 archaeological report from

Richmond county, July 14.
RUN away about the 20th of May last, an East-India Indian, named Thomas Greenwich; he is a well made fellow, about 5 feet 4 inches high, wears his own hair, which is long and black, has a thin visage, a very fly look, and a remarkable set of fine white teeth. A reward of 40s. will be paid the person who delivers him to the subscriber, besides what the law allows.
WILLIAM COLSTON.

An advertisement from the *Virginia Gazette* in 1768 seeking an East Indian who had escaped from a slaveholder.

The 1935 reunion of the Pettiford-Weaver family. This annual reunion was started by Martha Weaver Pettiford and her husband, Joseph. She was the daughter of Henry Weaver, a freeman who started the Weaver settlement in Indiana. Their ancestor Richard Weaver, an East Indian born about 1675, lived in Lancaster County, Virginia.

the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation identifies George Menefie as a wealthy English merchant who was assigned 485 hectares in Williamsburg, near Jamestown. He arrived in Virginia in 1622, and obtained a right to the land by paying passage for 24 immigrants, including an East Indian, named Tony, identified as a head-right. Menefie got land in Jamestown in the same fashion. This evidence suggests that the first South Asians may have been brought to Virginia within a generation of the arrival of European settlers—as early as 1624.

There is more evidence from Paul Heinegg, a retired engineer in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, a leading archival researcher and author. He has spent 20 years investigating primary sources to reconstruct the geneologies of people of color in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina and South Carolina. “Many people from India lived in England and came to the colonies as servants. I found a number who sued for their freedom in Maryland and some in Virginia. They blended into the free African American population,” says Heinegg.

His principal sources are the colonial-era county court order and minute books—nearly 1,000 manuscript volumes now preserved on microfilm. Also important are the national tax lists, deeds, wills and estate accounts, late 18th- and 19th-century free Negro Registers, marriage bonds, colonial parish registers, census records, newspapers, and Revolutionary War pension files.

Heinegg chronicles the earliest Indian American family trees in his book *Free African Americans of North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina*. In March 2007, Heinegg added to his Web site additional information on indentured servants and slaves from India: www.freeafricanamericans.com/East_Indians.htm

Here are some examples of his finds in colonial records:

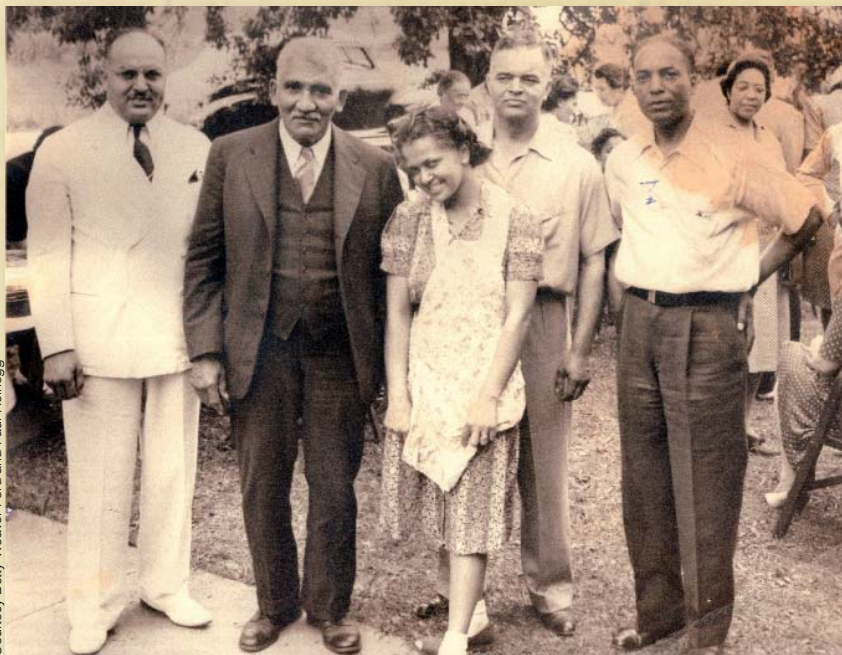
Lancaster County: William Weaver, born say 1686, and Jack Weaver, East Indy Indians, sued Thomas Pinkard for their freedom in Lancaster County court on 13 August 1707. The court allowed them five days time to produce evidence relating to their freedom but ordered them not to depart the county to some remote county without giving security to return to their master within the time allowed. Neither party appeared for the trial on 10 March 1707/8.

Richmond County: 6 February 1705/6, Petition of Sembo, an East India Indian Servant to Jno. Lloyd, Esq., for his freedom. Petition of Moota, an East India Indian, servant to Capt. Thomas Beale, surviving executor of Mr. William Colston, deced., for his freedom...ordered and judged that said Moota be free...ordered and adjudged that said Sembo be free.

Westmoreland County: March 1708, Will an East India Indian late a supposed slave to Mr. Danll Neale by his Petition to

this Court setting forth that some tyme in yeare 1689 being fraudulently trappand out of his Native Country in the East Indies and thence transported to England and soon after brought into this Country and sold as a slave to Mr. Christopher Neale deceased father of his sd present Master And that hee had ever since faithfully served the sd Christopher and Daniel Notwithstanding which the sd Daniel though often demanded denied him his freedom And the sd Daniel being summoned to answer the sd complaint appeared and both parties Submitted the whole matter of the complaint to the Court All which being maturely & fully heard It is considered by the Court that the sd Will ought not to have been sold as a slave and that he is a freeman.

Stafford County: Martha Gamby, born say 1675, was an (East) Indian woman living in England on 5 January 1701/2 when Henry Conyers made an agreement with her that she



Lance Weaver (second from left) with his nephews and niece at their 1939 family reunion in Marion, Indiana. He is the eighth generation descendant of East Indian Richard Weaver of Lancaster, Virginia.

would serve him in Virginia on condition that he would pay her passage back to England if she wished to return within the following four years. The agreement was recorded in Stafford County court about 1704.

Such documentation provides historians with indisputable evidence for the earliest historical link between people from the Indian subcontinent and America. This allows Asian Americans and African Americans, particularly those with South Asian ancestry, to re-vision their history and claim their full heritage.

Francis C. Assisi, based in Kochi, Kerala, received a South Asian Journalists Association award in 2006 for a series on South Asians in the U.S. Civil War published at indolink.com. He is working on a book documenting the early history of South Asians in America. Research assistant Elizabeth F. Pothen contributed to this article.

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